



Growing Food, Cultivating Community:

JJC's Agriculture Program Connects Technology and Current Social Issues to History and Tradition

by Amy Chellino



Since 1947, Joliet Junior College's Agriculture Program has set the standard for educating students on the newest technologies and issues in farming and food production. Many may not know that the program was first developed for returning World War II veterans. Former ag professor Max Kuster taught JJC's first ag students in a building just south of Joliet Central High School. In a 1977 interview with the Manhattan American, Kuster reminisced about the first agriculture building.

"It was a 3-story apartment building and [we] were raising chickens on the third floor..." he said. "When it rained we weren't quite sure what we had seeping through the boards on the floors."

Kuster was known for his persistence and he rarely took no for an answer. His colleague, current JJC Agriculture Professor Bill Johnson recently recalled one of Max's favorite lines: "We boys, all we can do is fire and fall back and see what happens."

Several years after the program was initiated, Kuster recognized a need for further education, and in 1954, he developed an agriculture curriculum for Joliet Junior College. The first four classes offered were Diary Science, Feeds and Feeding, Agriculture Economics and Crop Production.

His tenacity sparked him to coordinate a junior college program with the University of Illinois with agriculture classes that would easily transfer to their four-year degree program. In 1964, he was approached about starting a two-year pilot program. It was then that Bob Jurgens was brought on to develop coursework in Agriculture Business, which became the first certificate of its

kind in Illinois. In a 1999 interview transcript now located in the JJC Library Archives, Jurgens recalled those days.

"We told the kids they were all guinea pigs, work it out, nobody had ever done this before...We just flew by the seat of our pants...We had an advisory and they helped us determine what we needed, how to structure courses and so forth."

By 1966, the first class graduated with 42 students. In 1968, the formal Agriculture Production program began with Bill Johnson as developer, coordinator and instructor. It was around this time that the college separated from Joliet Township High School to become its own community college district and began plans for its first-ever campus on Houbolt Road.

While the Houbolt Road campus was under construction, the department was housed in a temporary building, and in the fall of 1972, the program moved to a permanent building "Myself, Max Kuster and Maynard Boudreau...sat down with a couple pieces of paper and drew the design of that ag building, and the architects took it and completed it," Jurgens explained in the 1999 interview. "And we wound up with the ag department." A portion of John F. Richard's Farm, which was acquired for the Houbolt Road main campus in 1968, became a land laboratory for the program in 1983. This 140-acre lab still provides students with educational opportunities to participate in testing and research.

In 1999, John Weitendorf, Sr., a 1942 JJC alumnus, generously donated 32 acres of land to the agriculture program and partnered with the college to build a facility that opened in 2007.

The Weitendorf Agricultural Education Center is located on Laraway Road and gives student hands-on experience farming livestock.

One element that makes JJC's agriculture program unique are the internships that students can participate in during their fourth semester. In 1999, Jurgens recalled how the internships began and their importance to the curriculum.

"Get your grubby clothes on, and get out in the dirt, and set those plants there," Jurgens said. "Actually, hands on...I can talk to you in the classroom...and then get your behind out there and do it," he proclaimed.

Even today, internship opportunities continue to provide students with opportunities to gain skills and further explore a particular area of farming.

In the nearly seventy years since inception, the department today has almost 100 courses. Agriculture students are trained on smart equipment that steers itself in the farmers' fields and applies variable rates of fertilizers, pesticides and seed. The department purchased its first drone unit last spring and all agriculture students have the opportunity to pilot the device. The images from drones help to determine where there are problems with crops. The curriculum has evolved to include technology and several classes discuss the reasons behind the use of technology to better educate students about producing an abundance of high quality food through various means.

Professor Johnson's career has spanned nearly 50 years at Joliet Junior College. The history and insight he brings to his students comes from decades of experience in the field. When asked about the issues facing agriculture today he explains that most people are completely separated from where their food originates.

"They are bombarded with misinformation about food and its safety," he said. "We live in a society that strives for sustainable measures...most people do not realize that we use fewer chemicals today to produce much larger crop yields in large part due to the adoption of GMO crops."

Science, specifically biotechnology, can now use genes to produce better quality plants and animals that are much more efficient and productive.

"One farmer today feeds more than 150 people—twice the number since I began teaching," Johnson explained. "All of the new technology has added more excitement to the prospect of being involved in producing grain and livestock and there is more awareness of the importance of producing enough food to feed a population of 9 billion people that we will have in the world by 2050."

Louis John Slagel graduated from the college's agriculture program and operates Slagel Family Farms in Fairbury, Ill. which has over 100 Chicago-area restaurants that feature his meat products on their menus. Slagel recently expressed that he gained many advantages and essential information about genetics, feeding and nutrition of livestock from the agriculture program at JJC.

As the college continues to educate students, these graduates help our community strive to be a place of balance, harmony and nourishment. With a rich history, state of the art equipment, knowledge of current food issues, and real-world opportunities, JJC's Agriculture Program has educated farmers on producing sustainable, nutrient rich, quality food essential for our community and country to thrive for generations.



Looking for a safe, secure place to donate your JJC memorabilia?

The JJC Library Archives is always looking for ephemera from our college's past. If you have materials you would like to donate, or have any questions about materials in the library archive, please contact:

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